



Victorian (Australian) parents are receptive to the idea of a primary school-provided lunch program: A mixed-method survey

J. Nanayakkara¹, G. Aydin¹, A.O. Booth¹, A. Worsley² and C. Margerison¹

¹*School of Exercise and Nutrition Sciences, Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition, Deakin University, Geelong, Australia*

²*School of Exercise and Nutrition Sciences, Deakin University, Geelong, Australia*

School-provided lunch programs offer numerous benefits to primary school students including improved school attendance and performance, reduced undernutrition, reduced food insecurity, the opportunity to learn healthy eating, and the development of healthy dietary habits⁽¹⁻³⁾. Australia does not have an ongoing national school-provided lunch program that provides food for all students. To successfully implement a school-provided lunch program in Australian primary schools, it is essential to obtain the opinions of all key stakeholders, including parents. This study aimed to examine Victorian primary school parents' opinions about a potential school-provided lunch program. An online cross-sectional survey with open- and closed-ended questions was conducted in Victoria, Australia, in 2022. Descriptive statistics and chi-square analyses were performed using SPSS software; thematic analysis was carried out using NVivo. Three hundred and fifty-nine parents responded to the survey. Fifty-seven percent of respondents said they would allow their child to participate in a school-provided lunch program, 34% were unsure and only 9% said they would not. The opportunity for hot-cooked lunches at school and the perceived convenience for parents were the top two reasons for favouring such a program. Fifty-eight percent were in favour of hybrid-type funding from both the government and parents, while 30% were in favour of being fully funded by the government. The most preferred amount to pay per meal was AUD5-6 (43%), followed by AUD3-4 (25%). When respondents were asked to rate the importance of six options in school-provided lunches (vegetarian, nut-free, dairy-free, gluten-free, egg-free, and vegan options), almost one-third of them selected having 'vegetarian' options as important or very important, whilst one-fifth selected 'nut-free', 'dairy-free', and 'gluten-free' options as important or very important. There were no associations between the parents' or children's socio-demographic characteristics and the likeliness of letting their children use school-provided lunches, funding preference, the amount willing to pay for school lunches, and the importance of different options. Respondents' written responses revealed that they expected school-provided lunches to be healthy and made from whole food and cater to the special dietary and cultural needs of their children. Their other expectations included food being tasty and offered in a child-friendly way, having a variety of food offered, and having backup options if the children would/ could not eat those meals. They also expected enough time to be provided for eating lunches so children could eat and enjoy the meals. The findings of this study suggest that Victorian primary school parents are open to the idea of a school-provided lunch program, but they do have several expectations regarding the menu and time for eating. Program planners could use the findings of this study to create a school lunch program that aligns with the parents' expectations and preferences.

Keywords: school lunch program; cooked school lunches; school lunch menu; primary school

Ethics Declaration

Yes

Financial Support

This study was supported by an internal grant from Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition, Deakin University.

References

1. Lucas PJ, Patterson E, Sacks G *et al.* (2017) *Nutrients* **9**, 736.
2. Oostindjer M, Aschemann-Witzel J, Wang Q *et al.* (2017) *Crit Rev Food Sci Nutr* **57**, 3942–58.
3. Waling M & Olsson C (2017) *Health Edu* **117**, 540–50.